Tumblr is Queer and Twitter is Toxic: Speculating About the Vibe of Social Media Spaces

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ABSTRACT

In this critique, I point to the different 'vibe' on several social media platforms, speculating about how the distinctive emotional atmosphere of these perceived public spaces and communities impacts the emotional experiences and expressions of users. I reflect on the rift between popular and academic discourse in addressing this layer, and ask questions about how it connects to design and what this could mean for designers and researchers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models**.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, vibe, Twitter, Tumblr, Tiktok, Instagram, Reddit

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media are *"Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content* [7].*"* They allow for communication and sharing of content at an unprecedented scale, characterised by a new sense of immediacy and emotionality [28]. Weaving in and out of our day-to-day lives, they have significant effects on our well-being, social interactions, relationships, and the way we construct our social identities [4]. Academic research and public discussions about social media reveal their potential to both positively and negatively affect users[1], on both individual and societal levels [29].

In terms of negative effects, for instance, especially prolonged social media usage is associated with depression [17], anxiety and other negative impacts on personal well-being [29]. Their general potential to have detrimental effects on the mental health of young people is much-researched and frequently discussed in academic and public conversations (e.g. recent uproar caused by leaked information revealing Instagram's operators are aware of its "toxic" effects on young girls [32]). Social media enforce hegemonic cultural norms and can perpetuate feelings of inadequacy in those already marginalised [5, 13]. Their role in the organisation of violent or hateful subcultures and groups [33] is also frequently discussed[2].

On the other side, however, with the very same affordances social media have become important tools for marginalised groups to build community, share knowledge, create social capital, and enact social justice [5, 13]. Social media are connected to happiness and positive feelings, where especially meaningful communication with close ties are beneficial to well-being [6]. Through social media, mental health information [29] and peer support communities around issues such as addiction recovery [12] are more accessible than ever before.

Often describing social media as double-edged swords, voices from social sciences and psychology point to crucial individual factors [10, 18]: whether social media impact us positively or negatively (or both) depends on many different aspects such as lifestyle, usage style, personal mental health history and state, media literacy, social interaction needs and style, attachment style, social status, and so on – they have become entwined with our lives in all their glorious entanglement and complexity. But towards which effects are social media geared by design, and what do we know in the field of HCI about the connection between design and the deeply personal and emotional experiences we have with social media?

1.1 Background

Although scarce, existing research on the role of platform design in the effects social media have on us as a society and as individuals indicates design does indeed play a key role in their impact. For instance, Theocharis et al. [34] find that "variation across key features make some platforms more fertile places for conspiracy beliefs than others", while Montag et al. [20] speculate that there may be connections between the design of social media and their addictive effect, a speculation corroborated by social media platform developers [1]. In terms of design interventions, Baughan et al. [3] examine dissociation as an effect designed into social media, and explore design interventions to reduce or disrupt normative dissociation, while Lyngs et al. [19] propose different approaches to combat distraction on Facebook – both offering interesting discussions and insights on themes of control and power.

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[1] A short note on the word 'users' before we begin: I know this word has an infinite load of very heavy baggage in HCI. Please note I am only using (heh) 'user' in the superficial sense of person using something, for want of a better word.

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[2] As is their potential to exacerbate existing societal issues: Social media are often criticized as enablers and tools for e.g. human trafficking [27], criminal organisation [2], ethnic persecution [21], political manipulation [14, 24], misinformation [30, 36], and radicalisation [35].

In looking at this work so far, a gap becomes evident: seeking to understand design, we are seduced to look at very neat and isolable phenomena (a known tendency in HCI in general) such as addiction or dissociation, or single design aspects such as notifications. No work connecting the feelings evoked by social media to their design and affordances exists in HCI to the best of my knowledge.

In contrast to this, social media users colloquially discuss and frequently agree on the emotional atmosphere of different platforms, often speculating about the design and the reasons behind the character of platforms and communities. As these discussions are echoed in research in social and media sciences, even without design being the focus of research in other disciplines, scientists from outside of HCI often gain knowledge from users that is relevant to the design of social media – for instance, the repeated and resounding call for customisability [5].

1.2 Talk Vernacular to Me

If our aim is to democratise their design and move towards a future of truly sustainable social media, it is paramount to not only include transdisciplinary knowledge, but to listen directly to the voices of individuals and communities living social media culture and experiencing social media in deeply human ways.

In this critique, to ignite a spark in this direction, I will present short snapshots of the emotional atmosphere on different social media platforms: based on my own experiences, using some screenshots as ethnographic artefacts to illustrate my arguments, I will attempt to make a case for acknowledging the 'vibe' of social media platforms in HCI.

I hope to achieve two things with this: firstly, to provide a critical impulse for researchers to include the 'vibe' of social media in the examination of their effects in connnection with discussions around their design. And secondly, to strengthen the case for including more intuitive ways of knowing and vernacular discussions in researching technological phenomena in society, and finding new ways to document and communicate them.

2 THE VIBE OF A DIGITAL SPACE

The existing research best comparable to my endeavor here can be found in the way media scholars are examining the new emotionality in the sharing and consuming of content on social media [25], as digital affect cultures [9] become central to critical discussions around the effects of social media in this field [28]. Usually, *affect* and *emotion* are the words of choice in these discussions. But because the aim of this critique is to draw attention to emotional layers that are already colloquially understood and discussed amongst users, and to make these discussions relevant to the field of HCI, I introduce here a word whose meaning slightly differs: 'vibe', which is commonly found in internet slang[3].

According to the top-rated definition on the crowd-sourced online dictionary *Urban Dictionary*, the noun vibe stands for "A distinctive emotional atmosphere; sensed intuitively [8]." The vibe of a space is colloquially used to describe the feeling of a room, the emotional 'vibrations' given off by the combination of the people within a space and the space itself. Despite its contemporary usage, the word vibe is not a recent creation (it was definitely around,

if not invented, in the New Age movement), nor is it purely vernacular, as it has made academic appearances in feminist theory, a connection fitting my plea for the inclusion of intuitive and vernacular knowledge (e.g. [16])[4]. Thus, for this critique, I will use the word vibe to reflect on the atmosphere or character of digital (public) spaces.

I root the perspective of the following in personal observations and colloquial discourse about platform design. I draw not only from my own experience as a white, middle-class, multilingual, central European Millennial with academic design education and a set of values that could be roughly described as eco-feminist, but also from anecdotal recollections of conversations with other Millennial and Gen Z folks close (most of which regrettably belong to the same social and cultural group) and less close to me, in person and online. From this context, I therefore also only explore social media platforms that are popular in my area.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Dolly Parton's initial meme.

3 SPECULATING ABOUT PLATFORM COMMUNITIES' VIBE

A meme made by Dolly Parton in January of 2020 depicted the famous singer presenting herself in different ways to fit her usage of LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Tinder [26]. It went viral as other celebrities filled the template with their own pictures, followed by many users with whom the meme resonated. The shared understanding of which image to use for which of the four platforms seems to be: images for LinkedIn are meant to convey professionality, images for Facebook congeniality, images for Instagram beauty or artfulness, and images for Tinder sexuality.

Although LinkedIn and Tinder have determined purposes that clearly connect to the choices of image, the consistent interpretation

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[3]It is also frequently used in verb form as 'vibing.'

[4]While vibes can be good or bad, as a verb, vibing is exclusively positive, and means having a good time and being in a positive emotional state.
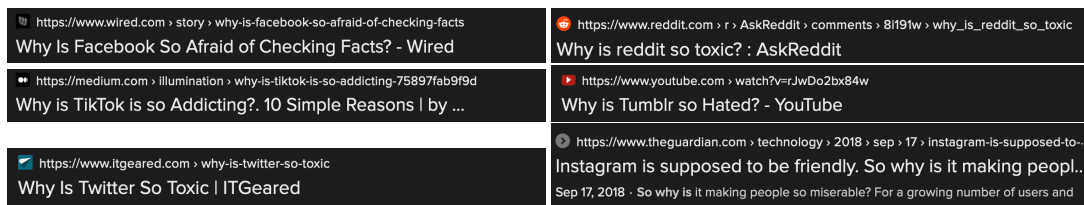
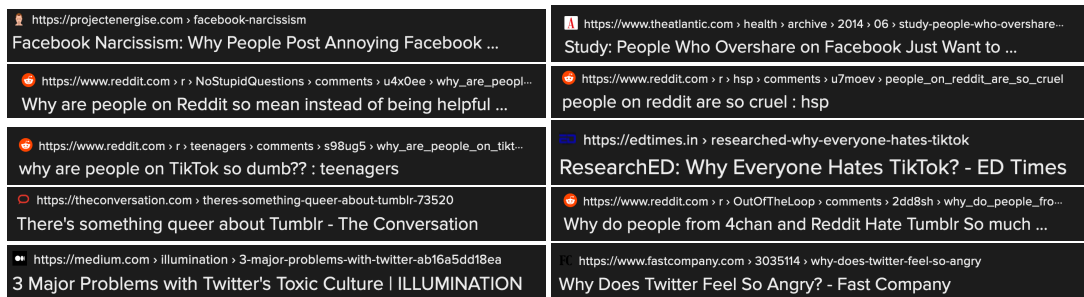**Figure 2: Screenshots of search engine results to "why is [platform] so ..."**

Figure 3: Screenshots of searching for "people on [platform] are so"

of the difference between the general-use social media platforms Facebook and Instagram is indicative of a shared understanding of the 'vibe' of these platforms.

In an onset of investigative whimsy, wondering whether my personal opinion would align with popular perception, I typed into the search engine DuckDuckGo (which does not track or personalise search history) "why is [platform] so" for a handful of popular social media (I added the word 'so' because it tends to be used as an enforcing word to underline strong personal feelings about a statement). Here are screenshots of the first entries for each that made a value judgement (Fig. 2)

I then decided to try it again with the search terms "people on [platform] are so", and screenshot the first two results that indicated judgements about the character of a platform and, by extent, its stereotypical user base.

Unsurprisingly, these results did, in fact, mostly align with my own perception of these social spaces:

Tumblr is 'queer' and 'fringe', Twitter is 'angry' and 'toxic', Reddit is 'mean' and 'sanctimonious', TikTok is 'foolish' and 'annoying', Facebook is also 'annoying' and 'overshare-y'. Strangely, even after scrolling through multiple pages of results, I did not find statements about Instagram, but if I had to go by personal experience, I would choose 'fake' and 'narcissistic'.

I know I will find agreement with these assessments in casual conversations with other users in my own social group, and speculate that I would find mostly agreement among many if not most users of these platforms. This is because I have come across similar statements (or implied statements) throughout the years – I just didn't think to document them. And therein lies the whole crux of experiential and internalised knowledge.

It is interesting to note that most of the search results, as well as most of my own judgements, are negative, except for Tumblr's 'queer'. Surprisingly, I am struggling to think of positive emotional

assessments that I can just as safely assume many other users would agree on. I suspect this is because there are fewer conversations about the positive aspects of social media, in person or online – the only positive 'vibes' I feel others would more or less agree on would be for Tumblr, whose userbase seems to have grown fond of their platform and discuss this with each other (more about this in a bit).

Of course, different users and communities will have different experiences owing to the many factors that make up individual usage style and individual experience. Doubtlessly, different spaces within these platforms have different vibes, and the same space's vibe may be experienced in different nuances depending on individual perception. But on the whole, to some extent, there exists a shared general perception of the different vibes of different social media, especially relating to experiences in public spaces and with usage style that is perceived as basic or common. Thus, even users who may have very different or opposing experiences will be aware of the 'public opinion': There seem to be some general bad vibes underlying all social media.

If we were to assume, for the sake of critical design exploration, that these speculations were all valid, this would raise a plethora of interesting questions – Why do we generally have more to criticise about our social media than to love? Why do we then keep using platforms that expose us to bad vibes, that trouble our own vibes? Does this have something to do with our tolerance of frustration and even animosity when interacting with technology, or with each other, or both? How is this connected to platform design?

3.1 Self-Identification, Self-Interpretation and Perception of Others: Tumblr vs. Reddit

Zooming in on a noticeable difference, on Tumblr and Reddit, many users identify themselves as part of the community of the respective platform, negotiating their position as part of the community of
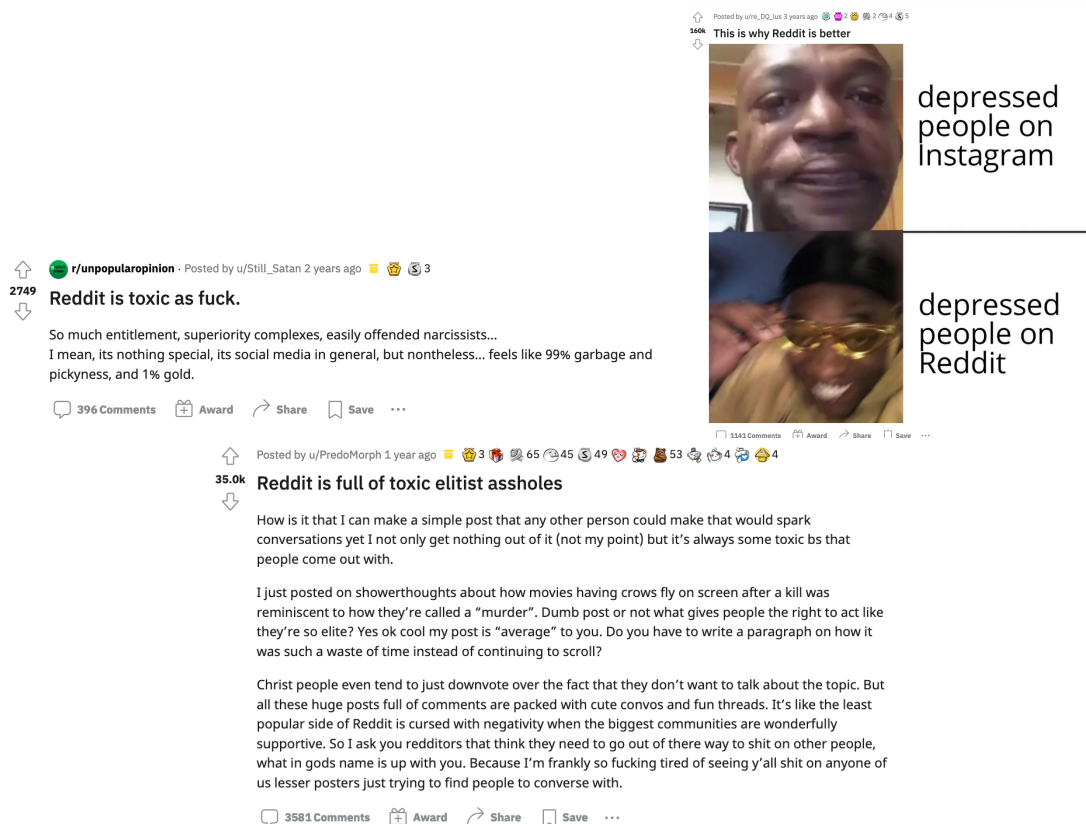
Figure 4: Screenshots of Reddit posts discussing Reddit.

this platform in relation to other platforms (e.g. Fig. 4), as well as negotiation their individual positions in relation to the rest of the perceived community of the platform they are on.

Take, for instance, the statements seen in Fig. 4 by Reddit users about Reddit, as upvoted by other users (the upvote count on Reddit equals all the upvotes minus all the downvotes). Note that I interpret 'Reddit' to be understood as the platform as well as the community[5], but this may not align with the respective post's authors' understanding, who may or may not identify as part of Reddit. Be that as it may, Reddit users very frequently discuss their own platform, on the one hand revelling in the sardonic vibe of the platform, on the other, complaining about it. Reddit especially likes comparing itself to the less norm-enforcing and more vulnerable and caring social media platform Tumblr, with which it has some sort of rivalry.

In contrast, many Tumblr users have a very evident and strong emotional connection to their platform, which they lovingly refer to as "hellsite"[6] and display a fierce sense of loyalty for, despite complaining about the state of things (Fig. 5). There are certain events, memes and other phenomena on Tumblr that users often refer to when invoking their sense of belonging and relationship to the platform and other users – these cultural artefacts are often

referred to as 'Tumblr Lore.' Tumblr Lore often circulates time and again, reaching most if not all users at some point. Many of these artefacts are community in-jokes: for instance, following a viral exchange by several users about a local children's hospital's unfortunate choice of colour in 2019 [11] (Fig. 6) , Tumblr users will often jokingly bring up 'colour theory' or the colour red three years later.

Tumblr Lore like this will re-appear every now and then even after years of being forgotten, and is always joyfully reblogged as 'Lore', creating a sense of belonging and being part of a virtual society that shares the same stories. Even the history of Tumblr, including fandom eras[7] on the one hand and design affordances and features on the other, is kept alive through (written) oral tradition.

Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok are not regarded in this way at all – of course, this may relate to user numbers, but while communities and spaces are created within these platforms, there is no sense of underlying community created by and within the platform *per se.* Although (or because?) Tumblr and Reddit are anonymous (although anonymity is not enforced) and can be used

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[5]Much like saying 'Austria' and meaning the nation in the broadest sense, including geography, people, and culture.

[6]Especially when the developers implement an unpopular change, or when there are technical issues.

[7]For instance, a phase in the cultural history of Tumblr where many users were fans of either or all of the series *Supernatural, Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, known as Tumblr's 'Superwholock' period (I think the heyday of this was the years 2011-2014, but don't quote me on this), saw a nostalgic resurgence in 2020, and despite having annoyed many Tumblr users who were not fans of these particular series at the time and led to some harassment, has come to be romanticised as a piece of Tumblr history. Similar to... 'real' history.
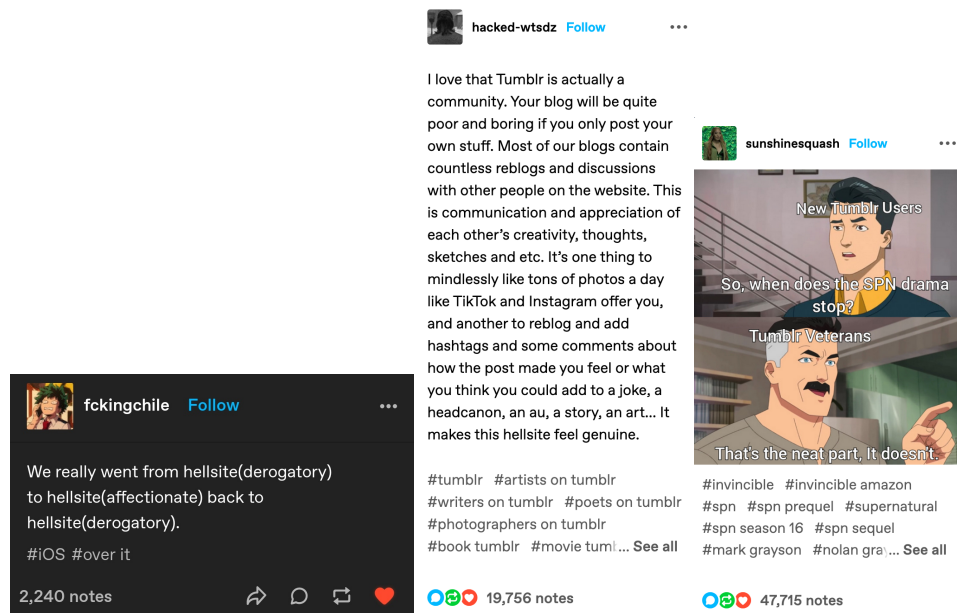
Figure 5: Screenshots of Tumblr posts, the first discussing a recent ban of certain tags on iOS, the others discussing Tumblr in general.

in vastly different ways that sometimes lie outwith the definition of social media[8], both seem to induce a stronger sense of identification with (or alienation from) the platform. The affordances of both allow content to be accessed more timelessly and be discussed more in-depth, and both are interest-oriented, that is, they allow for the creation of more interest- and fandom-based subcommunities among their community of users.

3.2 What Makes the Vibe of a Platform Toxic, What Makes a Platform Friendly?

Why do I feel unsafe and carefully choose my words on Twitter, but then post very vulnerable things without a second thought on Tumblr? – If you know a platform is prone to abusive comments and has a critical vibe, would you allow yourself to be vulnerable, or would you keep your guard up? Why do I feel the need to vent on Twitter when I am angry or have been treated unfairly, but if I find something cool and interesting, I want to show Tumblr. or text my friends in private? – Who do you share your everyday emotional experiences with? Why did I start hating and stop using Reddit? – Do you feel safe on Reddit? Which role could the design of Tumblr play in its having become and continuing to be a queer sanctuary [15]? – If you were a teen again, which platform would you explore your sexuality on?

Countless questions are whirring in the back of my mind. In terms of design, I am reminded of the ubiquitous calls for customisability I keep hearing, and I think about my favourite platform[9] – or indeed, the only one that does not trouble me with bad vibes or take a toll on my well-being, mostly because I have put effort into

making it so: Tumblr allows users to visually (and to some extent functionally) customise their spaces, re-blog each other's content in a transparent way, filter out content with certain hashtags, and share content in a variety of formats and lengths[10]. To me, the vibe on Tumblr is more supportive, friendly and inclusive than, for instance, on Twitter[11].

An important design difference between the two lies precisely with how much control users are given over personalised content. On Twitter, too, I have put time and effort into 'training' my algorithm, but although I have chosen preferred topics and filtered out certain words, like a good little data donor, it does not work as well, and I keep seeing content of genres that I can tell are popular (e.g. videos of baby animals) but have repeatedly marked as not interesting. Even though Twitter will technically hide Tweets containing the exact words I filter out, I will still see very closely related content. I will still see the Tweets I am trying to not see, they are just covered by a message that they have been hidden, which often makes me curious. And there is a certain aspect to content I cannot filter: the vibe. I have no way to filter out what Twitter likes showing me the most, which is content that is imbued with negative emotions. Are users posting more negative and angry content here than on Tumblr?

By design?

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[8]For instance, Tumblr can technically be used as a personal website without ever interacting with others, while Reddit can be used to create private forums.

[9]As you have surely noticed by now.

[10]That being said, Tumblr is far from perfect. An interesting trend in reclaiming additional control over content and interactions beyond the affordances of Tumblr is that many users have "DNI" ("Do not Interact!") messages at the top of their profile page, where they state which communities on Tumblr they distance themselves from and ask not to interact with them – this can range from users who are really annoyed by a certain fandom to users who are protecting themselves from abusers. It is something like a courtesy warning before engaging in the afforded blocking.

[11]Which I use out of professional necessity and which takes an emotional toll on me, but expanding on this would probably fill another entirely different critique...

So our local children's hospital recently redecorated, but I'm not too sure they really thought things out

jhenne-bean:

   forlovefromfear:

      diasporanpapi:

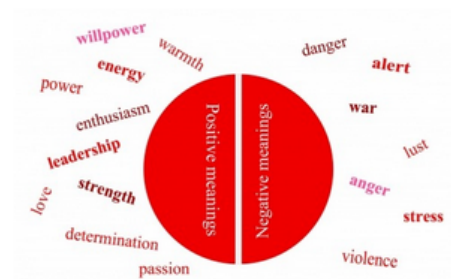   youthful-pills:

            ichigo-hiyoko:

               mintymaiden:

                  gildatheplant:

                     Literally any other colour would've been a better choice guys.

                     I'd like to point out that the colour red has more positive than negative meanings.

                  im sorry but this reply absolutely killed me

                  red can mean whatever the heck you want it to mean, that is never going to change that this straight up looks like they DRAGGED A BLOODY BODY ACROSS THE FUCKING FLOOR 😂

               Hi fun fact, colors do have meaning and there is a legit thing called color theory. Red does has more positive connotations than negative like the @mintymaiden said. Red is associated with more love, lust, passion than blood and death just like the chart shows you but If you want, here's a link for you to check it out yourself. Also, check out "The Designer's Dictionary of Color" by Sean Adams. Have fun learning something

                  I think y'all are missing the point here.

                  You can theorize to Nebraska and back but that doesn't change my immediate reaction which is that someone is literally dragging a corpse around

               I like that the presumption here is that "No One On Tumblr Has Heard of Color Theory, Let Me Explain in Depth" rather than simply acknowledging that the VISUAL EFFECTS of this particular color choice, applied in the manner it was, can still amount to "this is a hospital and that looks like blood"

               like, color theory doesn't exist in a vacuum. If your design of choice for Blood Red Paint is asymmetric splatters and sploches against the wall, or in this case, a snail trail on the hallway's floor, an infographic won't override the viewers' instinct.

            this post is the perfect summation of tumblr's reading comprehension and critical thought abilities

Figure 6: Screenshot of the Colour Theory Post.

4   WHY SHOULD WE INCLUDE THE 'VIBE' OF SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES IN OUR RESEARCH ABOUT THEM?

Again, doubtlessly, the perception of a platform will differ depending on sub-communities within these social media, which may have a very different experience of the vibe. It will differ depending on external or internal perception. It will be influenced by user demographics, and depend on different usage and user intentions. Many people might experience Twitter as fun, Reddit as a supportive community, and Tumblr as a terrible pack of bullies – I am not claiming universal understanding of a platform's vibe (or indeed think this is even possible), I am merely reflecting on trends that I, from my own subjective experience in my own social context, perceive.

And of course, the vibe will not be wholly caused by users, and not wholly caused by design[12]. But I argue that design *is* a critical factor and provides nudges towards the vibe through the overall aesthetics and functionality of a platform. Design could play a role in how users present themselves. It could play a role in the general attitude of users towards other users. It could play a role in whether marginalised and vulnerable users, for whom social media is often an important, yet risky resource [22], feel unsafe or safe in their usage of social media.

The vibe shapes and, in turn, is shaped by its users. As affective platforms, social media have an influence on how we communicate, and sometimes even on what we communicate or towards what end we engage in communication – here, Nguyen points to the toxic potential of Twitter as a result of the designed gamification of affect and communication for profit [23]. Whether a platform decides to be profile-oriented or topic-oriented, whether it decides to be anonymous or not, how it represents feedback and what kind of feedback it allows, how customisable certain elements are, and many other functional as well as formal design aspects shape the vibe of a social media platform.

Once established, for whatever complex combination of reasons, the vibe shapes the platform and user interactions, thus reinforcing itself. I argue that design could play a role in changing the vibe.

One of the great challenges social media developers face today, for instance, is to find the balance between allowing for safe spaces and protecting users from abuse on the one hand, whilst simultaneously trying to prevent conspiracy theories and isolated opinion bubbles. In this, as mentioned before, platform design plays a role [34] – but which role? How much of a role? And wherein else does it play a role?

Another interesting phenomenon is affective discomfort (or, as we call it here, a creepy vibe) when using social media: affective discomfort when using digital technologies, creepiness especially in the context of privacy and data, is normalised and becomes mundane [31]. How did this become so, and how can it be ended? Current discussions are making a case for considering creepiness in the design of apps, i.e. heeding the vibe when designing.

When social media companies talk about their digital products, they are uniquely aware of the emotional intentions behind their design. And similarly, it is this aether of an emotional space, this

'vibe', that is the most featured in my own private conversations about social media. It is what people talk about, it is how they understand the phenomenon of social media.

But when we as HCI researchers talk about social media platforms, we usually talk about algorithms, language processing, interface usability or similar functional aspects, in connection with very specific and measurably effects. To move towards better understanding social media and their design, and from there towards designing more positive social media, we need to accept and include the more chaotic layers of emotionality and vibe.

5   CONCLUSION

Using a series of illustrative screenshots and drawing on my personal experience as well as conversations with others, I have attempted to showcase that every social media platform has a vibe, and have attempted to make a case for including this vibe when researching them as technologies or in terms of their design.

The social context of platforms and the vibe associated with these virtual public spaces is a factor in decisions users make about what to share, how to present themselves, and how guarded to be in their social interactions. This intuitive knowledge is shared, understood, and discussed in concrete terms by many users of these spaces. However, our field is struggling to draw from this knowledge.

I hope this will be but one of many impulses in the larger conversation about how we include and work with experiential ways of knowing in HCI. By including socio-emotional aspects, such as the vibe of digital spaces, in HCI research around social media, and by acknowledging vernacular discussions and experiential knowledge, I hope we – designers and researchers into social media – can better examine the connection between design and effects, and inform the development of safer spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[12]A set of interesting questions here: Why did these particular folks come to this particular platform in the first place? And then who stayed, who left, and why?

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